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RESTRUCTURING ELEMENTARY AND
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Current Issue Paper 179



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RESTRUCTURING ELEMENTARY AND SECONDARY EDUCATION IN ONTARIO

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Prepared by:

Bob Gardner
Assistant Director
Legislative Research Service

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INTRODUCTION

The education system is constantly changing: Ontario's some 1,900,000 students and 123,000 teachers come and go in a seemingly immutable annual cycle. Underneath these yearly transitions, the demographic make-up of students, and their families and communities, shifts over time; curriculum is updated and reorganized; some boards of education rapidly grow, while others decline; the technology used in schools changes quickly; teachers are constantly being trained and retrained; and the future social and economic world for which children are being educated remains unstable and often unpredictable.

This paper focuses on three areas where basic restructuring of elementary and secondary education is taking place, or at least is on the immediate horizon. It briefly examines education funding; governance, especially the role of school boards; and key elements of what goes on in the classrooms, including high school reform, curriculum, testing and teachers' professional organization. There seems little doubt that there will be fundamental changes in these and other areas in the near future. Minister of Education and Training John Snobelen was quoted as saying that "this year we will have the biggest change in education in our schools that the province has ever seen."¹

Post-secondary Education

To keep to a manageable length, this paper will not examine post-secondary education. As well, the direction of potential restructuring is less clear for higher education. Provincial funding reductions have certainly brought to the fore key questions and two recent provincial initiatives have begun to address the future of post-secondary education:

- On July 16, the Ministry of Education and Training released a discussion paper outlining the current state of post-secondary education in Ontario, its changing social, economic and fiscal environment, and questions to focus discussion on its future – accessibility, fee policy and sharing of costs, and cooperation among institutions.²
- At the same time, the Minister also established a task force to examine these questions of the most appropriate sharing of costs among students, the government and the private sector; ways to promote cooperation among colleges and universities and between them and secondary schools; and what needs to be done to meet expected levels of demand. The five member Advisory Panel on Future Directions for Post-secondary Education is headed by David Smith, principal emeritus of Queen's University, and will report by December 15.³

EDUCATION FINANCE

Education is a major sphere of public expenditure.

- The Ministry of Education and Training has the third highest operating expenditure of Ontario ministries: \$8,461 million in 1994-95, interim expenditures of \$8,156m for 1995-96 and planned expenditures of \$7,601m for 1996-97. Capital expenditure was \$421m in 1994-95, \$576m for 1995-96 and \$222m is planned for 1996-97.⁴
- Total expenditure on elementary and secondary education in Ontario in 1995 was estimated to be \$13,603 million;⁵
 - the province contributes \$5,267m – 38.7% of total expenditures – through various grants to school boards;
 - the boards raise \$8,336m through local property taxes – 61.3% of the total.

The need for reform of education finance has long been recognized:

- expenditure per pupil varies greatly in boards across the province;
- this variation is partially based on the widely different assessment bases available to boards, especially with the concentration of commercial/industrial assessment in more affluent cities;
- more generally, there are significant local and regional inequities in the way property taxes are assessed and levied.

A wide range of commissions and task forces have addressed possible reform in recent years:

- The 1993 Fair Tax Commission recommended that the province assume responsibility for funding education to a provincial standard and replace local property taxation as a source of core funding with general provincial revenues.⁶
- The 1994 Royal Commission on Learning similarly recommended that the province should determine and allocate adequate per-pupil funds, and that boards should be allowed to raise no more than a further 10% locally, through residential property taxes only.⁷
- Finally, the Working Group on Education Finance reform, the latest in several advisory groups to the Ministry on this issue, reported in June 1996. It called on the province to increase the basic per-pupil level of

funding and develop mechanisms for updating the funding model. However, its representatives from public and separate boards and teacher unions could not reach a consensus on how education revenue should be raised.

Pooling

That the main line of conflict within the Working Group was whether and how commercial and industrial property tax revenue should be pooled is not surprising; resolution of this issue has eluded governments and task forces for decades.

- In general, public boards, especially from the large urban centres, do not want to lose their commercial and industrial assessment. They argue that these resources are required to fund the extensive and expensive programs needed to address the social problems facing children in major cities.
- Catholic and French-language boards want greater access to this assessment. In terms of assessment bases, 39 of the 40 poorest boards are separate.

The Ontario School Board Reduction Task Force, chaired by former Liberal Minister John Sweeney, was established in February 1995 to advise the Minister of Education and Training on how to reduce the number of school boards and trustees (discussed below). The Task Force also concluded that inequitable access to assessment was a major problem and recommended a standard mill rate and province-wide pooling of commercial and industrial assessment.⁸

‘Negative-grant’ Boards

Provincial grants are allocated to boards according to a complicated equalization formula, so that varying assessment bases are taken into account and ratepayers in different areas face similar tax burdens to fund education. Several public boards – currently Metropolitan Toronto and Ottawa – are in a ‘negative-grant’ situation. This means that their assessment base, especially commercial and industrial, is such that it provides all their revenue and they receive no provincial grants. The recently passed Bill 34 allows payment from these boards to the Ministry.

Donna Cansfield, president of the Ontario Public School Boards’ Association, estimates that at least \$30 million from Toronto and \$14 million from the Ottawa boards could end up going to the province.⁹ What will actually happen is uncertain; the legislation allows but does not require payments from the ‘negative-grant’ boards. Many commentators argue that the major lever

the province can use in negotiating with these boards is the threat of province-wide pooling of commercial/industrial assessment.¹⁰

Reduced Provincial Funding

In March, Minister of Education and Training John Snobelen released a strategy to help boards realize savings, stating that “it is spending beyond our means, not underfunding, that threatens the future of Ontario schools.”¹¹ Measures included reducing provincial grants to school boards by some \$400 million for 1996-97, with further reductions in subsequent years, a one-year moratorium on new construction of school facilities, giving boards responsibility for negotiating sick leave provisions locally (under Bill 34 passed in June), and allowing boards to adapt their administrative structures to local needs by modifying regulations under the *Education Act*. The Minister told trustees and teacher federations that his savings strategy was based on three goals: “classroom funding should be protected; opportunities should be provided for local decision-making and locally negotiated solutions; and local taxes should not be increased.”

These cuts were much debated in the Standing Committee on Estimates’ June hearings on the Ministry of Education and Training.¹²

- Liberal education critic Richard Patten, MPP, argued that grant cuts will amount to \$800 million the following year and that when social contract and other factors are added, will actually be \$1 billion;
- the Minister argued that a number of boards have achieved the necessary savings by cutting administration, while protecting classroom spending;
- NDP education critic Bud Wildman, MPP, argued that 64 public boards have announced mill rate increases for 1996 and that this was a result of the provincial cutbacks.

The effect of grant reductions on school boards has continued to be the focus of considerable attention:

- In August the Ministry released a study showing that 100 of 129 boards that set property taxes for 1996 had raised their rates.¹³
- A vice president of the Ontario Public School Boards’ Association argued that the provincial cuts had forced boards to raise taxes, cut programs or a combination of both.¹⁴
- Some boards have announced large staff layoffs and others have canceled programs such as Junior Kindergarten, adult education and English as a

second language.

The Ministry published a second study in August showing that Ontario had higher education costs than other provinces:

- using Statistics Canada data, the study found that the province spent \$644 more per-pupil than the average of the other nine provinces;
- the report identified higher teacher salaries as a key factor -- the maximum salary was 24% and minimum salary 11% higher than the average of the other nine provinces;
- representatives of teacher and trustee organizations argued that the study inflated Ontario costs by the way it treated capital spending and pension contributions, deflated costs in other provinces and ignore the territories where costs are higher.¹⁵

Further reductions in provincial education spending would appear to be on the government's agenda. John Snobelen was reported as saying that much larger cuts will be made, to be announced in the Minister of Finance's economic statement later in the fall. The Minister stated that he wanted to bring Ontario spending on elementary and secondary education in line with that of other provinces and that relatively modest reductions in employee compensation could be the source of significant savings.¹⁶

These debates on funding levels and reductions have kept the spotlight on the need for fundamental reform:

- The Premier was quoted as telling the *Ottawa Citizen* editorial board in April that "education finance is badly broken. It's not fair..." The government will be choosing among options such as pooling all property taxes for education and then distributing the revenue to boards through a uniform formula,¹⁷ or funding education through income rather than property taxes.
- The Minister argued that the reports on Ontario expenditure relative to other provinces and on boards raising property taxes (discussed above) "show that the system is not responsive to the needs of students or taxpayers" and point to the need for change to improve the quality of the system. He stated that "the system screams for education finance reform."¹⁸
- New ways of provincial and municipal funding of education and other local services has certainly been a major issue in the 'disentanglement' analyses conducted by various advisory bodies, including the current 'Who Does What' secretariat chaired by David Crombie. John Snobelen has named a sub-committee of the secretariat to review education finance

and report by the end of September, with the goal of new legislation this fall.¹⁹

- Recent press speculation indicates that the government is considering three options:
 - pooling all commercial and industrial property taxes for education and allocating them across the province through per-pupil grants;
 - pooling all property taxes, both residential and commercial, and allocating them provincially; and
 - removing education from the property tax base entirely, with the province funding education through its general revenues (this would entail the province transferring the costs of other services such as transportation, sewage treatment, etc. to municipalities who would fund them through property taxes).²⁰

GOVERNANCE

The question of education funding and its reform is closely connected to school governance. In fact, the recent Sweeney Task Force argued that the governance changes it was recommending “are impossible without the **prior or simultaneous** reform of education finance.”²¹

There are currently 168 public and separate school boards, including four French-language boards and 74 French-language sections or advisory committees within boards. The size of their operations varies tremendously; from small Northern boards with budgets of several million to the rapidly growing Peel Board with over \$600 million in expenditures. Within broad frameworks set by the province, boards establish local policy, employ teachers and other education staff, develop curricula and determine program mix and budgeting. Locally elected trustees are traditionally seen to be the voice of their communities in governing education.

Recent comments by Ministers indicate that substantial changes in school boards’ functions and scope are being considered.

Collective Bargaining

While the reform of teacher collective bargaining has been discussed for some time, debate has intensified within the current fiscal climate:

- As of August, 242 collective bargaining agreements were still being negotiated; 81 of these had expired in previous years, 8 as far back as 1993-94.²²

- When provincial cuts were first announced, boards called on the province to give them new tools to re-negotiate with their teacher and other unions, but the province did not give them the power to over-ride contracts.
- Key questions that recur in media commentary are: Will boards attempt to win wage and benefit concessions in fall negotiations with teachers? If boards are not successful, then would the province take over bargaining?²³
- The Sweeney Task Force had recommended that there be centralized province-wide bargaining with teachers. Comments by the Minister to the press indicate that the government is considering this direction.²⁴
- In late August, John Snobelen announced that Windsor lawyer Leon Paroian would conduct a review of the legislation governing teacher collective agreements, reporting by October 30. The Minister noted that 166 boards negotiated 294 collective agreements: “that’s a lot of duplication, and a huge expenditure of time and money.”²⁵

Further contentious labour relations points would appear to be:

- preparation time – the Minister believes boards should negotiate reductions in the time teachers are allowed for preparation (this would allow boards to hire fewer teachers to cover the needed class time);
- teaching Junior Kindergarten – the Minister supports using lower-paid community college educated Early Childhood Education specialists rather than certified teachers.²⁶

Cooperation Among Boards

There have been increasing efforts to share bus routes, computer systems, administrative services such as purchasing, payroll and benefits, and other resources among boards.

- The Sweeney Task Force recommended that boards be required to form consortia to manage services.
- The previous government had introduced legislation that would have required cooperation and the current government passed Bill 34, which gives a clear mandate to establish cooperative agreements between boards and other institutions and requires boards to report annually on these efforts.
- A Metropolitan Toronto School Board discussion paper argues that it and the Metro separate board should set up a joint ‘school services authority’

to purchase and distribute supplies, buy and operate a computer system, and operate single transportation and personnel systems.

- Ann Vanstone, chair of the public board, estimates that savings could be \$100 million a year.²⁷
- The initial reaction from the separate board was not favourable, especially to the public board's proposal to share its commercial/industrial assessment with the separate board. The separate board prefers province-wide pooling.²⁸

Parent Accountability

While trustees have traditionally been seen as the key means of bringing local concerns and viewpoints to education governance, parents have increasingly been demanding an enhanced voice in the way education is delivered. Following a Royal Commission on Learning recommendation, the NDP government announced that councils would be established in each school.²⁹

The Ministry of Education and Training issued a Policy/Program Memorandum in April 1995 detailing that boards must direct schools to begin establishing school councils in September and ensure councils are in place in all schools by June 1996. Parents and guardians will form the majority on the councils, but other community representatives, students, the principal, a teacher and other staff will also be members. The council will have broad advisory functions to the principal and, where appropriate, to the board. Boards are encouraged to involve parents and others in an advisory capacity at board level and to facilitate communication among school councils.³⁰

Amalgamating Boards

The Ontario School Board Reduction Task Force's mandate was to make recommendations on reducing the number of boards by 40-50%, on trustee representation and on streamlining French-language education. The parameters within which it was to work included recognizing boards as the basic governance structure and protecting Catholic and Francophone constitutional rights to govern their own education. After considerable public consultation and release of an interim report, the Sweeney Task Force reported in February 1996. It recommended that:

- the 168 boards be amalgamated into 87 (the Task Force set out detailed maps on the proposed new boundaries):
 - 44 public English-language boards;
 - 28 separate English boards;

- 5 public and 10 separate French-language boards, which would replace existing boards, sections and advisory committees.
- trustee representation be based on enrollment (they set out a formula whereby boards with enrollment under 30,000 would have 7 trustees, ranging to those with over 90,000 having 13);
- minimum and maximum trustee honoraria be \$5,000 and \$15,000; and
- board expenditure on operational and administrative support be limited to 40% of their budgets (the Task Force also set out a formula for the number of administrative and other support staff based on enrollment and proposed mechanisms to deal with surplus administrative staff and interim governance).

The Future of School Boards

Statements made by the Minister at a September caucus retreat indicate that the government is considering moving beyond the Sweeney Task Force proposals to eliminating or significantly reducing the role of school boards.³¹ If education was to no longer be funded through locally raised property taxes, and if the province were to take over curriculum development and collective bargaining, then key functions boards perform will have been eliminated. Traditional board administrative duties could be transferred to municipal councils.

The Minister said there will always be a need for a “local political body” involved in education decision-making, but that “it doesn’t have to be as broad and large as a school board. It doesn’t have to take on all of the functions that a school board currently has.” Representatives of the parent group People for Education, the Ontario Public School Boards’ Association and the Ontario Separate School Trustee’s Association rejected the Minister’s speculations and argued that the government lacked a clear vision to guide its education reform.³²

IN THE CLASSROOM³³

There are some 1,900,000 pupils and 123,000 teachers in 5,270 schools across the province.

Programs

A discussion paper on reforming high school education was released in September.³⁴ It argued there is widespread recognition of the need for change within the educational community and pointed to the many task force,

legislative committee and Royal Commission reports that have recommended system-wide improvements. The paper outlined a number of changes the government is planning:

- Ontario will move to a four year program by 1998;
- the current high school curriculum has not been revised in ten years, a period of considerable change, and standards are not consistent or clear. The curriculum will be redesigned, with four distinct series of courses with clear purposes and appropriate content and instruction methods;
- assessment will be changed – students who can demonstrate they can pass a course will be able to receive credit and progress without taking the course;
- a teacher-advisor system will be expanded province-wide so that every student has an advisor;
- student transcripts will be clarified;
- stronger partnerships between high schools and colleges, universities, businesses, parents and the community will be created.

A province-wide consultation, chaired by Parliamentary Assistant Tony Skarica, will begin in October. The discussion paper asked for input on four questions and set out options for people to consider:

- how should Grade 9 be organized – what should be done with streaming?
- what proportion of courses should be compulsory and which should they be?
- how should cooperative education/work experience be integrated into the new program?
- what role should provincial testing play in the high school system?

Bill 34 made offering Junior Kindergarten optional for boards; the previous government had made JK mandatory.

Curricula

The NDP government announced that the Ministry would assume responsibility for curriculum development, arguing that boards were spending \$30 million and that eliminating duplication could free up money to be put back into the classroom. The Ministry intended to work with teachers, students, parents and community representatives to develop a consistent province-wide curriculum, which would include expected outcomes, standards and classroom-ready curriculum material. Provincial outcomes for Grade 1-9 math and language were released in February 1995.

The current government has continued these developments and will be field-testing a uniform report card on student achievement in the 1996-97 school year.

Testing

In February 1995 then Minister Dave Cooke announced that province-wide testing for elementary and secondary students would start in September 1996 and that an independent office would be created to conduct the tests and ensure quality and accountability. The plan was to test Grade 3, 6, 9 and 11 students in reading, writing and math every year. Ontario would also participate in various national and international assessment projects.

In December 1995 new Minister John Snobelen introduced Bill 30, which passed in June 1996, to establish the Education Quality and Accountability Office. The Office will evaluate the effectiveness of education, assess student achievements, and develop tests and require boards to administer them.

Teachers' Professional Organization

The previous government had begun to implement a Royal Commission on Learning recommendation that teachers be established as a self-regulating profession. The PC government's Bill 31, which passed in June 1996, establishes the Ontario College of Teachers to govern and regulate the profession. The College will:

- create and enforce professional standards for members;
- issue and revoke teachers' certification;
- accredit teacher certification and ongoing education programs; and
- investigate complaints and discipline members.

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³⁰ Ontario Public School Boards' Association, *Background Paper: School Councils, Implementation in Ontario and other Provinces* (Toronto: The Association, May 1995).

³¹ Jeff Harder, "Education boards to get the axe," *Toronto Sun*, 20 Sept. 1996. The article suggested that the Minister had rejected the proposal to consolidate boards after MPPs told him that it would not be supported in their constituencies.

³² "Snobelen begins examination..."

³³ For the following section, initiatives of the PC government were outlined in the Minister's presentation to the Estimates Committee and those of the previous government in *New Foundations*.

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